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When Frank Sublett was a Naval officer during World War II, he didn't know he also was a pioneer.

Sublett, 85, is one of two living members of the famed Golden 13, the nation's first black Naval officers.

"They didn't know what to do with us," Sublett said. "They probably didn't expect us to make it."

Before President Truman desegregated the military in 1948, the Golden 13 left the service without a formal graduation or thank you — until Monday.

Sublett joined dozens of war veterans, community leaders and U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk to announce the country's first World War II memorial spearheaded by black Navy veterans.

Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, secured a \$97,000 federal grant for the memorial, which will be built in North Chicago's Veterans Memorial Park.



“This is a way to thank them,” said Kirk, himself a Naval Reserve officer. “They were fighting a war and also fighting racism from behind their own lines.”

Kirk said if it wasn’t for men like Sublett, the road would not have been paved for black leaders such as Colin Powell to move up in the armed forces.

The memorial, at Sheridan Road and Broadway Avenue, is scheduled to be built in 2006 and is designed by Sutter Architects of Libertyville.

It will have benches and a “Walk of Honor,” featuring bricks engraved with names of those who donate to the project. Bricks will cost \$50 to \$200.

Although the memorial will honor all World War II veterans, there will be special plaques marking the service of the Golden 13 and other prominent black military heroes.

“I’m pretty old now and didn’t think it would ever happen,” said Sublett, who lives in Glencoe. “It’s really an honor.”

The proximity to North Chicago’s Great Lakes Naval Station is important, Kirk said. This way, the memorial will be one of the first things recruits see before their training.

“This is the birthplace of the U.S. Navy,” Kirk said. “For guys to come together and do this is key.”

The memorial will help North Chicago stand out during holidays such as July Fourth and Veteran’s Recognition Week.

“North Chicago considers this day more than just an honor,” Mayor Leon Rockingham said.

“Because of the Golden 13, we stand here today.”